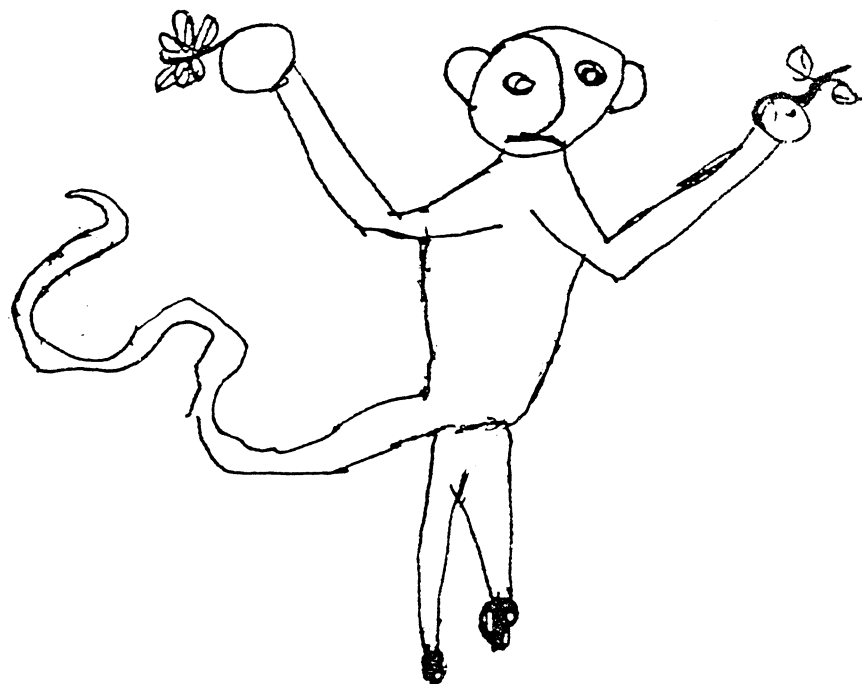


# Do We Underestimate Children's Creative Abilities?

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When trying to teach children, all parents and teachers have experienced a range of successes as well as failures and frustrations. What makes teaching so difficult?

One of the main problems in teaching is the tendency for adults to have a lack of faith in the abilities of children. I am saying this with reference to my own experiences as a parent and a teacher, as well as a teacher trainer.

Time after time I have found myself in front of a class (perhaps Class II, or III, or V), with a lesson I'm supposed to teach: I have some information I want to tell the students - the answer to a question. The reason I want to tell them this information is because I think they don't know it, and I think it would be good for them to know it - it would be interesting to them, it would enlarge their world view, it would help make them better people in some small way.

But sometimes, before I begin, a doubt creeps into my mind - maybe they already know what I want to tell them. So instead of telling, I ask them. Nine times out of ten I find out that there are at least a few children in the class who can provide an answer that's just as good as my answer. Some children will give answers that are different than mine, but not incorrect. Some will provide an interesting new insight into the question. Even some of those 'dull' students who sit quietly in their corners, (somehow surviving taunts from students as well as teachers) can sometimes be coaxed to speak up and give surprising new insights. So my prepared lecture turns into an interesting class discussion in which all of us contribute and all of us learn something from each other. [I should mention that this would probably not have been possible if the class size was too large - I have been fortunate enough to occasionally teach classes of less than 25 students.]

My conclusion is that I repeatedly underestimate the students. However, I consciously keep trying to give the students chances to prove themselves.

Once, as the school was preparing for their annual function, I was suddenly told to get some students to paint a mural on an outdoor wall of the school. It had to be completed that very day. It threw off my attempts to plan the day's schedule, but anyway, it sounded like fun.

The only problem was that the wall had to be painted with waterproof, enamel paints, and the students were only in Class II and III, with no previous experience of this kind.

Anyway, I called 6 or 7 students out from their classes and asked them to paint a picture on the wall. I gave them aprons and showed them how to wipe their large brushes on the sides of the big cans after they dipped them in to get the paint. I told them how to prevent the paint from dripping all over the wall.

However, I never made a single mark on the wall myself. Neither did I tell any student what to draw or how to draw it, except for the initial advice to draw big, since the wall was big. When the students were about half done, one of the other art teachers came by and asked whether I had drawn the outlines in pencil first. Although I assured her that I hadn't, she didn't seem to believe me.

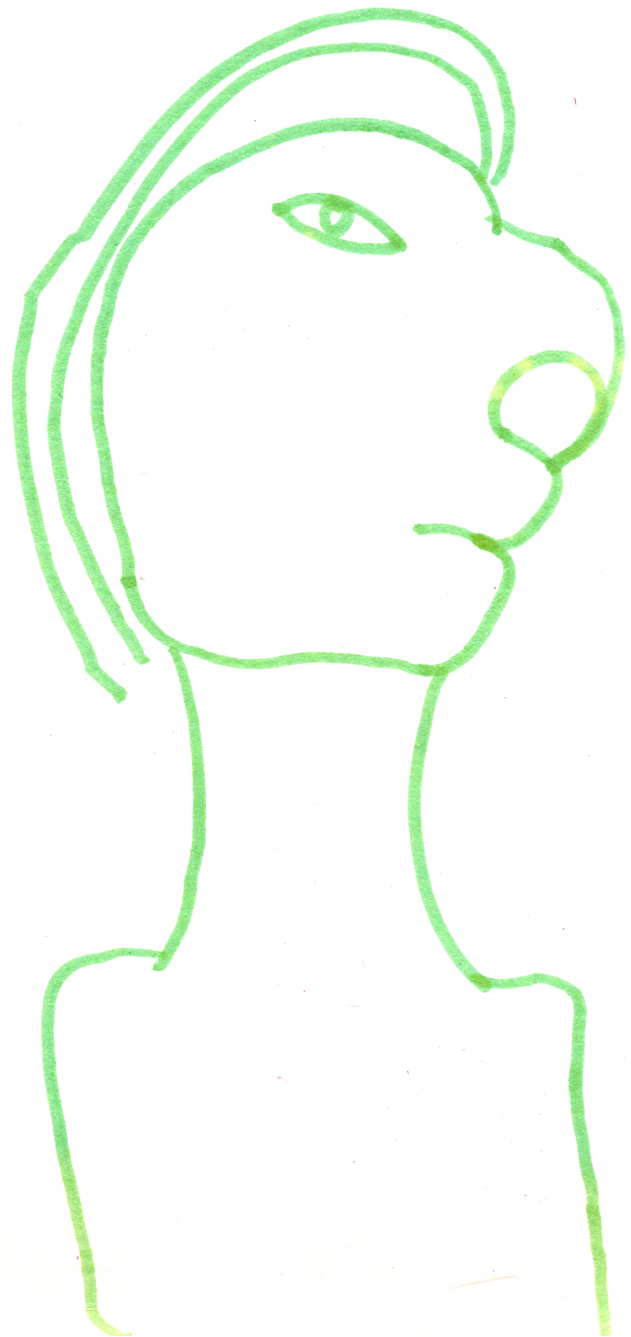
But somehow, without my help, these young students managed to come up with a mural that looked pretty good to the average onlooker. To me it looked fantastic. Yes, of course it did look like it had been made by children rather than adults. But in my opinion this childlike quality was what made it seem fresh and original. What modern artist wouldn't like to be able to paint with such spontaneity and originality?

Actually, at first I had been a little afraid the children might make a mess of the wall. However, I had been teaching these students art once a week for the past few months, and I knew some of them were good at drawing creative, new pictures.

If I had just been relying on the standard methods of teaching art I might not have known what the students were capable of. But I had been doing things a little differently. Some of the other teachers in the school had also been observing my teaching methods out of the corners of their eyes. One of them asked me, 'Don't you ever draw on the board?' I thought about it, and realised that no, I hadn't once drawn on the board. Until she said that, I didn't even realise that this was what the standard teaching method was - the teacher drew, and the students were supposed to copy.

But my most frequent admonishment to the students was always, 'Don't copy! If I want a copy, I can go get a photocopy!' Instead I asked each one of them to draw something that no one in the whole world had ever drawn before. (I have occasionally shown them examples of art. But I've always removed the examples before the children start on their own pictures.)

For a serious art student, copying can certainly be a useful exercise. But it is far more important to give students a chance to be creative, have fun, and express themselves through art. Copying will stifle them.



Sometimes I asked the students to look at something and draw what they see. They drew portraits of each other while they were closely observing. They drew animal pictures while looking at small plastic models of animals I had given them. They scribbled solid shapes of dancing students. They drew line drawings of profiles. They drew pictures without any lines. They made pictures in black and white without any colour. They drew with sketch pens without first using pencils. They drew abstract drawings inspired by music I played. They drew straight lines without using scales. They went outside to draw pictures of trees as they observed trees. I placed a potted plant on each student's desk for them to draw.



A plant drawn while closely observing the plant, Karan, Class III, Chandigarh

They had never done any of these things before because their art teachers had thought they would not be capable of doing it. They did not have faith in the children's abilities to do anything other than copy.

Initially, I faced problems with some students who did not have faith in their own abilities. They had been told so many times that their work was no good that they believed it. Without even making one mark on their paper, or perhaps after drawing and erasing, drawing and erasing, and erasing and erasing, they would say, 'I can't do it!' 'You do it for me. Ma'am!'

But I never once made a single mark on any student's paper. Neither to help them get started, nor to correct them when they are finished. I told them again and again. 'Yes, you can do it. I know you can do it!' I asked them to look carefully, to observe, and then to draw what they saw, as they saw it. 'Do you see that shoulder?' 'What kind of curve does it have?' 'Make a curve just like that on your paper.'

The less 'education' the students had had in art, the easier it was for them to try drawing their own pictures. But I never found a child who didn't finally manage to draw a picture all by themselves.



Contour figures, Puneet Singh, Class III, Chandigarh



Figures, Ravikaran, Class III, Chandigarh



I have had similar experiences in teaching lessons in creative writing, poetry, science, and social studies. Whenever I give the students a chance and insist that they do their own thinking, they exceed my expectations.

My favourite part is seeing the happy excitement on their faces as they find out that they are capable of doing their own work, and when they show me their work, literally jumping with joy as I respond with a comment that is not negative. What more can a teacher ask for than to have a group of students who enjoyed their lesson so much that at the end they are begging for more paper to draw more pictures, for a chance to write more poems or tell more stories?

